

#163 HAROLD DONOHUE: NAVIGATION RADIOMAN OF FLYING PBY'S

Bart Fredo (BF): Seeing your bio, I was going to ask you what part of Texas were you from with that accent.

Harold Donohue (HD): Brooklyn. (Chuckles)

BF: Okay. I'm going to read this just so we log the tape. The following interview of Harold Donohue was conducted on December 3, 1986, in Honolulu, at about 1:50 in the afternoon. Mr. Donohue now lives in Woodland Hills, California. The interviewer was Bart Fredo and also in the room is Mark Tanaka-Sanders of the National Park Service.

Mr. Donohue, let me start off by asking you to tell us your name and where you hailed from back in 1941.

HD: Okay. My name is Hal Donohue. I was living in Brooklyn, New York when I enlisted in the Navy, in 1941.

BF: What was your rank and your job description?

HD: On December 7, I was the navigation Radioman Third Class, flying as a crew member of the Flying PBY's on Ford Island.

BF: Now, I understand the week before the attack, you were flying out of Wake Island. What were you doing?

HD: We were, what they call, sector searching. We were patrolling all around the island and one day the boat . . .

BF: Around Wake Island?

HD: Around Wake Island. And one day, they come out --- we were radioman up on --- mechanic were on the planes at all times. And they come out with the boat and they loaded 500 pound bombs on our plane. And the next days after that, we took off, patrolling all around the island, looking for something.

BF: Did you ever patrol in the Hawaiian Islands?

HD: Yes. Yes, I was there for months before the thing happened. And they sent us out to Midway and Wake about two months before the December 7.

BF: When did you get back to . . .

HD: We were routed back -- we arrived back at Pearl on December 5, at night. And they told us to take the rest of the weekend off and come back Monday morning.

BF: Your planes were, what, at Ford Island?

HD: Ford Island, yes.

BF: So, let's go to the morning of December 7. Where were you?

HD: At the time, I was by the Aloha Tower in Waikiki.

BF: Downtown Honolulu.

HD: Downtown, right, in downtown. And it come over the radio that the Japanese were attacking, so we hopped a taxicab and head back toward the base. And we were strafed by Japanese planes as we were coming down.

BF: In the taxi?

HD: In the taxi.

BF: May I ask you to back up a minute? What were you doing at Aloha Tower?

HD: Well, we were just walking around the neighborhood there. We were trying to get breakfast.

BF: You and your buddies?

HD: Me and my buddy, right. Another buddy of mine, yes.

BF: Had you been on liberty overnight?

HD: Yes. From Friday night until Monday morning we were off.

BF: So you were having a good time that Saturday night?

HD: Right, yes.

BF: Anyway, so you took the taxi to Pearl . . .

HD: Right.

BF: . . . and you got strafed?

HD: Yes.

BF: Tell us about that.

HD: Well, we just -- the planes just come down strafing the road, all the cars coming up the road. And they hit some cars, you know, right in front of us, but we didn't get hit. When we got down to the main gate, they took so many Navy protocol, and they assigned them the different duties. They assigned me and my buddy to the USS *CASSIN* and *DOWNES* to put out the fires, help fight the fires.

BF: What kind of ship was that?

HD: That's two destroyers.

BF: Tell us about them.

HD: And they were tied up right in front of the *PENNSYLVANIA*, which was not hit, as I understand it.

BF: What was your reaction when you suddenly came upon this scene at Pearl Harbor?

HD: I don't know. It's just bewilderment, it happened so fast. You couldn't believe it that you just, you know, we just got right into it and that was it. Then I guess the first wave went out and short time later, the second wave come in. And every time they come down, I guess we scattered, and took, hid somewhere. And then . . .

BF: What kind of hits did you take?

HD: Well, I mean, they were strafing and bombing all around there.

BF: Did they hit the ships you were working . . .

HD: No, they were already sunk, and they just didn't -- they were in dry dock and they were on fire. But they didn't hit our ship, not while I was there.

BF: Where did you see them hitting?

HD: The USS *NEVADA* made a run, trying to get out the channel. And I saw that get hit a couple times. And I saw them run it up on the beach, so that to keep it from sinking in the channel.

BF: What else? See any other ships hit? Did you see the *ARIZONA* hit?

HD: No, no.

BF: Or the *OKLAHOMA*, or any other battleship?

HD: I don't recall seeing any of that. I mean, there was so much going on all at once.

BF: Did you see, that morning, see people doing unusual things? Acts of heroism or things incongruous to the situation?

HD: I don't recall any of that. I mean, we're just doing all kinds of wild things, I mean.

BF: Confusion? Would that be a good way of describing the scene, confusion?

HD: Yes. That's right.

BF: Were you afraid for your safety?

HD: Well, yeah, sure. I think you'd be crazy if you weren't, I mean. But, no, I can't think of any.

BF: Can you think of what was going through your mind while you were working out there?

HD: Just praying, I guess, that's about it. That's about all I can remember. It's a long time ago.

BF: Oh sure. The first time you had a chance to look out to Battleship Row and to see the devastation, the smoke just cleared and you could really see what happened, do you recall what your reaction was?

HD: I can --- my recollection now is patrolling afterwards and taking off down the channel and seeing the battleships upside down, the propellers in the air and all the wrecks all over the place, and all the debris in the channel we were flying through. But that's about all I can remember.

BF: You would patrol in . . .

HD: Take off from Pearl Harbor and take off and patrol around the island.

BF: Take off in your PBY?

HD: Right.

BF: So I assume that at least some of your planes made it through the attack all right.

HD: Right, there was a few of them made it through.

BF: Were most of -- were destroyed or damaged?

HD: I think most of them were destroyed. There's a lot of pictures of PBY's that [were] damaged on the, in the papers and things.

BF: When did you -- yes? When did you start patrol . . .

(Taping stops, then resumes)

BF: Was there anything more about the taxi ride that . . . no?

HD: Just hopped in the taxi and got out, was strafed, that's all.

BF: Okay. Let me take you back to when you and your buddy were fighting the fires on those two ships in dry dock. Tell us a little bit about the work you were doing.

HD: Well, like I say, we were assigned to that *CASSIN* and *DOWNES* and we take fire hoses and try to, you know, fight the fire. And then somebody would yell, "The planes are coming," or something and we just scatter and dive under something around there. And then as soon as they went, you get back on the hoses again. But that's about all I remember that.

BF: When these planes came in and strafed you, were they strafing you or your general area?

HD: Just the general area. I mean, just the, I guess, anti-personnel strafing.

BF: Did you see anybody get hit?

HD: No. No. No, but we saw them coming, we just, you know, gotta dive, get under something.

BF: What happened the rest of that day, to you? What did you do the rest of that day?

HD: Well, as soon as I could, my buddy and I, we were both from over there at Ford Island. We took the whaleboat over, it was ashore (trails off). And then we were sent out with a squadron and I remember we put up a sandbag -- I don't know what you'd call it -- we had to mount the machine guns on it. And we just stayed down there most of the day. I do recall that night, there were some planes coming in and somebody gave the word or somebody started firing and the sky just lit up like, you know, with all the tracer bullets.

BF: These are U.S. planes coming in?

HD: It turned out it was the planes from the, I think, the *ENTERPRISE*, coming in.

BF: Did you take part in any of the firing?

HD: Yes, I was on machine gun at that time. I was feeding 'em, helping feed the cartridges into the gun. Somebody else was firing it.

BF: And when you first started doing that, you were pretty sure what you . . .

HD: Oh yeah.

BF: . . . were shooting at was an attacking plane.

HD: Right, right. That's what we -- everybody thought was the, you know, they were coming back because rumors were flying all over that day. They were coming in Kaneohe, they were coming in here and what.

BF: Did you hit anything?

HD: I don't know. Who knows.

BF: Did you see anything get hit by someone else?

HD: I can't recall. They said there were a couple planes went down, but I can't recall seeing them.

BF: Talking about planes going down, did you see any of the attacking planes during the two _____?

HD: I saw them on Ford Island, you know, when they . . . there was one plane we --- that was a Japanese plane was down and in fact, I got a piece of souvenir of the rising sun from it, but . . .

BF: Did you see any Japanese planes get hit in the air?

HD: No, no.

BF: So the rest of that day, then, you were at your squadron on . . .

HD: Right.

BF: . . . on Ford Island.

HD: Ford Island.

BF: What happened in the next few days?

HD: Well, I guess, there was a few planes and I remember going out on patrol and just patrolling around the island, looking, you know, out there patrolling. And then, I don't know if you want me to go on because we patrolled and then we left, went to Australia, out to Pacific.

BF: While you were patrolling, did you ever see anything?

HD: No, never saw anything.

BF: Nothing suspicious?

HD: No, didn't see anything.

BF: So you patrolled for a few days and then you eventually left the island and flew down to Australia, you say?

HD: Yeah, we, in early January, we got our orders and we were sent out to -- well, we took off, we didn't know where we were going, but before we took off, everyone in the squadron was advised to take out the maximum life insurance you could afford. And to write two copies of a will and give one will to the officer on the squadron there, send another one home. We didn't know where we were going. So we loaded all our gear on the planes and we took off from Pearl. When we got in the air, the patrol plane commander showed us a copy of the orders. We were to proceed to the Philippine Islands to reinforce the Asiatic fleet with PBY's.

BF: So that's where you went.

HD: We never got there because the Japs got into the Philippines. We got as far as Surabaya in the Dutch East Indies. So we flew patrol out of the Dutch East Indies, up around Borneo, Makassar Straits, the island Makassar, into 'Nam.

One day, we went up, we were ordered up to see if there was a Japanese fleet off the coast of Borneo, and we were ordered up to see if they were putting troops ashore or if they were coming down the coast of Borneo. We saw them, they were putting troops ashore and just about then, Japanese fighter got on our tail, but there was huge cumulus clouds, so we ducked into the clouds and avoided 'em. We eventually landed over in Makassar, the island of Makassar. We got a radio message that night that there was another Japanese fleet up the other side of Makassar, and they wanted us to go up and see the same thing. So we flew up there, saw a Japanese fleet putting troops ashore, and we just high-tailed it out of there and went back to Surabaya.

BF: What did the rest of the war hold in store for you? You spend it all in PBY's?

HD: No. No, I -- we eventually worked our way down to Australia. Then they put us on the USS FLYING LADY, old aircraft carrier. They took us down to Fremantle, Perth, Australia. They loaded up the *LANGLEY* with P-40's, the Flying Tiger planes. And they shipped 'em up north to fight, but they never got up there, the Japanese ships got 'em. I understand we sank the *LANGLEY* ourselves, rather than let it fall into Japanese hands.

BF: Were you aboard the ship when it went down?

HD: No. They took us off at Fremantle and they sent . . . we went up to the Royal Australian Air Force, Airdrome in -- it was outside of Perth, Australia. We flew with the Royal Australian Air Force for a while. And then we come down to Perth and started our own little base in Perth, Australia, patrolling out of there. Then they sent us up on two planes, they sent us up to Corregidor to evacuate MacArthur's generals and some nurses. And I would --- out of that we started at Mindanao, refueling, we went to take off together, either coral or rocks ripped the bottom out of our plane, so we had to take the generals and the nurses off the plane, and what happened to them, I never found out. But we had to make a makeshift repair on our plane, tied a blanket around the bottom of it and ropes, then we bailed and the pilot just gave it the gun and we just kept bailing and took off.

BF: Let me ask you to summarize the rest of the war briefly. What did you do after that?

HD: Well, spent some eighteen months in Australia, patrolling. Then they sent me back to pilot's training in the States. And that was it, I stayed in the States.

BF: And the war ended?

HD: The war ended.

BF: Is there any one thing that's vivid in your mind regarding the attack on Pearl Harbor? Something that stands out more than anything else, that taxi ride, or . . . ?

HD: The taxi ride, yeah, that and fighting the fires and to be in the Navy, in the Navy yard section. But they were doing across the way, you know, right across on Ford Island, where the battleships were. But that's what stands out, I mean, fighting those fires and seeing those ships upside down later on.

BF: Were you affected at all by the martial law that was declared? Did you have a chance to go on shore leave after that?

HD: Just a couple times. I think we had to be back by five or six o'clock in the evening, I think, you had to be back ready to go across the . . .

BF: Remember what you did, those times you went ashore, where you went?

HD: Waikiki Beach. (Chuckles.) Most of the time, it was.

BF: Swimming, drinking?

HD: Swimming, yeah, drinking. Typical Navy things.

BF: Some people who went through the attack, survived the attack, as you did, still have some bad feelings about Japan and about Japanese, even to this day. How do you feel?

HD: I guess I don't . . . it happened . . . I mean, I'm sure a lot of them didn't want to be there and they had their orders and I just forget about it and let the good lord straighten it out.

BF: Do you ever dream about what happened?

HD: No.

BF: You played a part, maybe a small part, but you played a part nonetheless in a very major historical event. Has that affected your life in any way?

HD: No, I guess it's one of the highlights in my life. I mean, it's . . . it played a big part in my life, to be in the Navy. I never really looked back on it. I enjoyed a lot of it. Later on in life, you mean? No, I'm sure it was to my advantage. I learned an awful lot.

BF: Do you think about it much, about the attack?

HD: No. No.

BF: Are you reminded of it a lot? For example, if you hear the words, "Pearl Harbor," or "December 7," . . .

HD: Doesn't bother me. I mean, it's like . . .

END OF INTERVIEW